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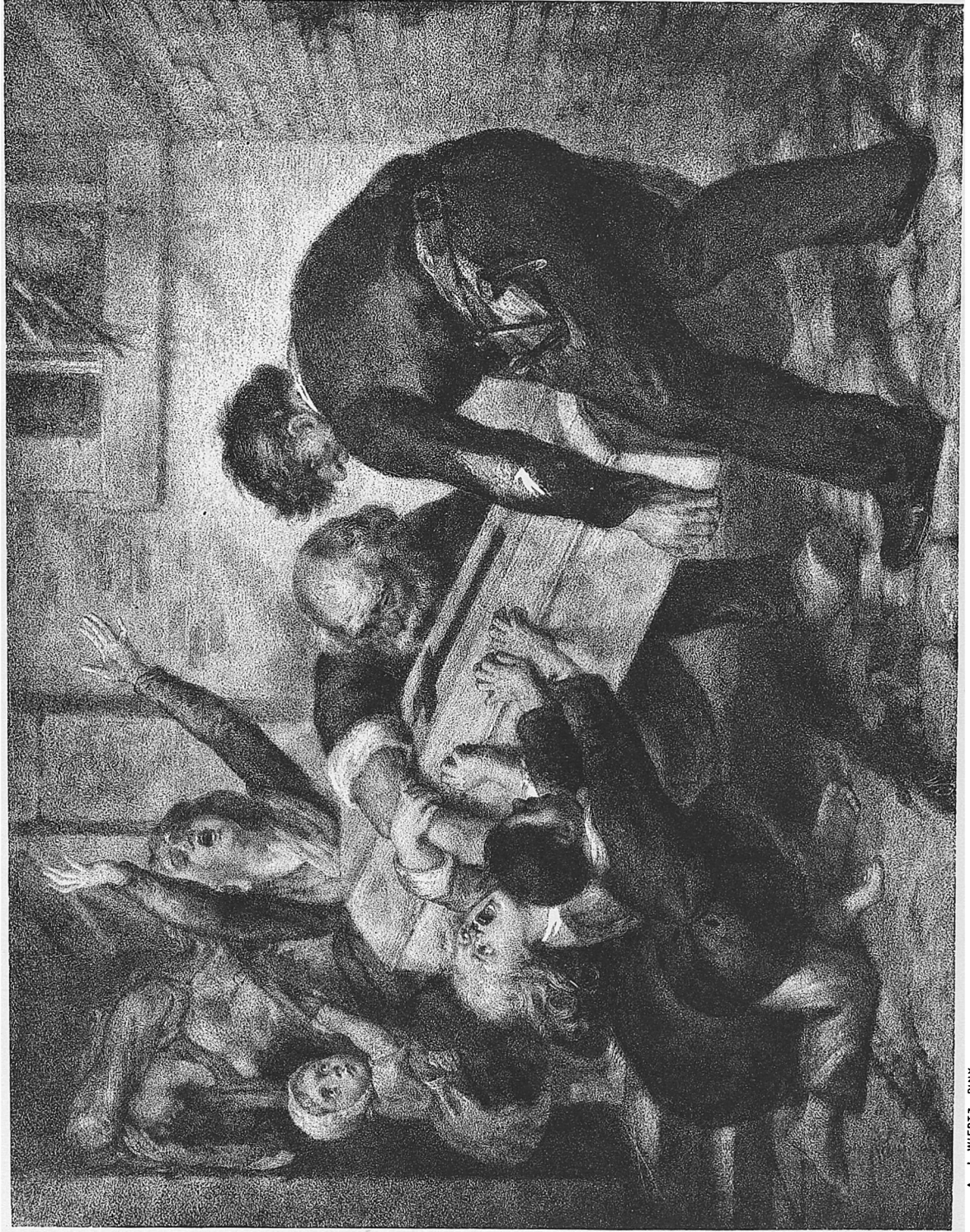
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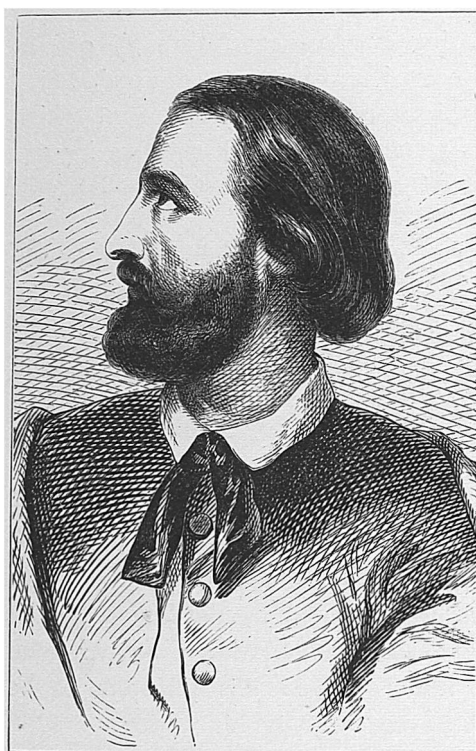
CHAS. METTAIS, DEL.

THE ORPHANS.

A. J. WIERTZ, PINX.

ANTOINE JOSEPH WIERTZ.

I.—THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST.



ANTOINE JOSEPH WIERTZ.

FROM A PORTRAIT BY HIMSELF IN THE MUSÉE WIERTZ.

THE story of the life of Antoine Joseph Wiertz, the famous Belgian painter, offers a curious illustration of the difficulties which beset the path of the seeker after truth in matters of history. Wiertz was a child of the nineteenth century, he has been dead but little more than fifteen years, his biography has been written by one of his friends, and yet the accounts given of his life in books of reference and in articles published in well-known periodicals are so curiously contradictory that but little reliance can be placed upon them. For this reason alone, if for no other, it might seem worth while to give a short account of the life of this extraordinary genius. The details in this article may be relied upon, as they have mainly been taken from the biography of the artist, written by his friend and physician, Dr. L. Watteau.¹

Wiertz's father, Louis François, born at Rocroi in 1782, was a man of sufficiently remarkable character to merit our attention for a few moments before we pass on to the story of the son. At the age of seventeen he became a soldier, but after two years of hard service he received a discharge, and entered the hospital at Louvain, in which he remained until 1803, when he declared his ability to take care of himself. In the year following he married Catherine Disière, and settled at Dinant as a tailor. Here, on February 24th, 1806, was born the son who made his father famous by the faithfulness with which he followed the principles instilled by the parent. Later on, Louis François entered the *gendarmerie* of the then existing kingdom of the United Netherlands, in which service he was raised to the rank of a brigadier in 1816.

The son manifested his artistic tastes very early, and the father assisted him in every possible way, providing him not only with pencils and crayons, but also with a flute. For Wiertz, like Angelica Kauffman, hesitated for a time as to whether he should become a votary of music or of the arts of design. But while the parent thus cultivated the æsthetic nature of the child, he also trained him mentally and morally in a soldier-like bravery of thought and action, such as

¹ L. Watteau, *Catalogue Raisonné du Musée Wiertz, précédé d'une Biographie du Peintre*. Bruxelles, 1861.— See also:— La Garde, *L'Atelier de Wiertz*. Bruxelles, 1856;— Louis Labarre, *Antoine Wiertz. Étude Biographique. Avec les Lettres de l'Artiste et la Photographie du Patrocle*. 2^e éd. Bruxelles, 1867;— An Essay in Herman Grimm, *Fünfzehn Essays*. Neue Folge. Berlin, 1875;— An article signed E. F. (Ernst Fœrster?), in *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, Vol. I. p. 273;— *Catalogue du Musée Wiertz, précédé d'une petite Notice Biographique*. Bruxelles, 1866.

might well serve a general of armies or the leader of a reformation. He taught him to hold himself above every event of life, to disdain wealth of gold, and to strive for riches of knowledge and attainment. He inculcated indifference to momentary joys or pleasures, and endeavored to make success in his own career and the glory of his country the principal aims of his life. While he made the boy fully understand his own love for him, as well as the tenderness of his mother's affection, he also impressed it upon him that devotion to his studies was the best reward the parents could hope for. The result of all this was, that, when the son was but fourteen years old, the father was able to write to him: "I tell you, your fine mind, your good character, and your inclination to the right, always make me feel as if you were thirty rather than fourteen years old. I therefore look upon you not only as my son, but also as my friend." From this time, in 1820, he always began his letters, "My very dear son and friend." As we study the artist's life, we shall find many things which the knowledge of this early training will enable us to understand more readily.

When still a child, Antoine essayed modelling and engraving on wood, and through one of his early achievements gained a powerful friend. He had carved a frog out of wood, which startled all the visitors at his father's house by its life-like appearance, and the fame of which reached the ears of M. Paul Maibe, member of the States General, who took such an interest in the young artist that he sent him to school, had him taught music and drawing, and a year later, in 1820, placed him in the Academy of Antwerp.

There are some pretty stories told of the earliest works of this artist, which may properly be given here, before we consider what he did after he had enjoyed the advantages of the schools. It is said that, when but twelve years old, and without any assistance, he mastered the art of wood-engraving, "cross-hatching" and all. Twenty-one of these wood-cuts, executed between 1817 and 1819, are now in the Musée Wiertz. The boyish fame which he enjoyed in Dinant and its neighborhood was much increased by two signs which he painted for a landlord of the vicinity, one representing a spirited black horse, the other a white horse and its rider. The boy was so poor that the landlord had to buy the necessary colors for him, and one can fancy his ecstasy when for the first time he united the magic of color with his power of design. Dr. Watteau also tells us of the intense desire of the boy to see better pictures than those that had so far come under his observation. Night after night he was haunted in his dreams by the appearance of a man wrapt in a cloak and wearing a Spanish hat, and bearing a banner upon which glowed, in letters of fire, the word ANVERS. Wiertz fully believed this phantom to be the spirit of Rubens, who thus commanded him to go to Antwerp to study his works.

At Antwerp, where, as we have seen, he was sent by M. Maibe at the age of fourteen, Wiertz came under the teaching of Herreyns and Van Bree, just when the Renaissance of the Flemish school led to the desertion of David and the following of Rubens. Here he was obliged to live with the strictest economy, as his allowance was only one hundred and forty florins (about fifty-six dollars) a year. His devotion to his studies was absolute. The room which he occupied was very small, and, as he had no fire, he was in the habit of wrapping himself in his bed-clothes, and sitting up in bed to draw from the human skeleton, until nature would be put off no longer, and he fell asleep with pencil in hand. When he awoke in the morning, he often found himself half-frozen and shivering; but, thanks to his hot, insatiable ardor for his work, he soon grew warm through forgetfulness of the cold. "Besides the price of my board," he wrote at this time, "it is rare for me to spend two coppers." A friend who was then much with him says: "This little room presented at all times a chaotic appearance, from the bones, the anatomical studies, books, papers, musical instruments, and the various appliances of the painter, sculptor, and engraver being tossed together in confusion. His room pictured the seething of his wild, tumultuous mind, in which passion for every branch of art asserted itself and strove for mastery." Besides following the prescribed studies of the Academy, he also read much, devouring political and historical writings, as well as translations from the



THE LOVERS.

PAINTED BY A. J. WIERTZ. ENGRAVED BY S. S. KILBURN.

classics, and devoted much of his time to music. When he poured out his heart in the tones of his instrument, the weird strains moved with deep emotion all who passed his window. It was not long before he attracted attention in his solitary life. His continued intensity of study was so unusual, his loneliness so marked, that curiosity led many to seek to know him. Meantime his fellow-students regarded him as a half-crazed creature, sometimes admiring, but oftener ridiculing his peculiarities. It seems that even then, when but a child in years, he resolved never to sell a work of his imagination, for he refused all offers that were made to him. This determination he never swerved from, and at a later period he thus gave expression to it in a letter addressed to a friend: "To paint pictures for glory, portraits in bust for soup,—such shall be the occupation of my life."

When Wiertz had been two years in Antwerp, and was but sixteen years old, both his father and M. Maibe died. From this time he was compelled to rely entirely upon himself, and he proved to be, as he had seemed to his father, a man in character and steadfastness of purpose.

Undoubtedly the political changes then impending in Belgium, and the excitement attendant upon them, somewhat distracted Wiertz; for, while his professors advised him to compete for the *prix de Rome* in 1826, he did not gain it until 1832, after he had passed either ten or twelve years (there is a disagreement among the authorities) in the Academy. In his later writings he thus refers to these final years in Antwerp, especially to 1830:—"Justice had been fought for, and then good painting had to be struggled for. The words 'Our Country' set all heads on fire. Every one was ready to sacrifice on her altar, each one according to his capacity: this one his life, that one his fortune. Painters felt that they also must give, and all were unanimous that they must give life to a new school. 'Vive la Belgique!' they cried;

'Vive Rubens!'—and our ardent youths might be seen in our museums, giving themselves with inconceivable enthusiasm to the old masters, studying them! analyzing them! explaining them! And what huge canvases did they bring forth! What waves of splendid color! Strange epoch and happy effects of enthusiasm! The fire of the barricades had kindled the fire of genius."

When Wiertz finally received the laurel wreath and the travelling stipend of the *prix de Rome*, he wrote to his mother:—"The path to glory is open to me." Before going to Italy, he stopped in Paris, where he remained a year, and endeavored to support himself by portrait-painting. But he could find no employment, although from one hundred he gradually reduced his price to fifty francs, and at last placed a sign over his door with "Portraits gratis" inscribed thereon.

Not long after his arrival in Italy, Wiertz was taken sick in Milan, where he was cared for in a hospital. Here commenced the pleasure, which proved an ever-increasing delight, of seeing the works of the masters in their own country. His happiness was inexpressible, but so much courage had he even then that he dreamed only of producing works which should excel those of Raphael and Michelangelo,—an idea which sustained him throughout life, and the last to which he gave utterance on his death-bed.

He had hardly reached Rome, when he shut himself up in his studio with a vast canvas,—no models, no artistic auxiliaries or expedients,—nothing but his thoughts and his colors,—and here he painted his first colossal picture, *The Struggle of the Homeric Heroes over the Body of Patroclus*. Louis Labarre, one of his biographers, tells us, that, when the picture was exhibited after the painter had worked on it a year, six thousand artists in Rome came to see it, and beheld it with amazement. On the strength of this work he was elected to the Academy of St. Luke, and when Thorwaldsen saw it, he exclaimed, "This young man is a giant!"

It was the custom for the laureate students to return to the Academy some pictures painted in Italy, and the expense of the carriage of such works was paid by the institution. These pictures were usually small, and the charges very slight. Therefore, when the secretary of the Academy at Antwerp received a bill of five hundred francs for the picture sent home by Wiertz, he was amazed and indignant, and the painting would have been refused had not Van Bree been willing to pay the charges. He thus became the means of introducing his former pupil to the world; for the discussions over the *Patroclus* soon brought the name of Wiertz to the knowledge of all Europe. In Belgium the admirers of the picture far outnumbered those who dispraised it, and the Academy even tendered the artist a banquet. In Paris, however, where it was exhibited in 1839, it received nothing but censure. This was so great a disappointment to Wiertz that he never fully recovered from it. He subsequently offered the work as a prize for the best essay on *The Evil Influence of Journalism upon Art*. The winner sold it by lottery, and it disappeared from the sight or knowledge of the public. The artist himself had already pointed out the imperfections of the *Patroclus*, and declared that he could do better. Accordingly, in 1845, he repeated the same subject, and this second picture, nineteen feet by twenty-seven and a half in size, and generally admitted at the time of its exhibition to be an improvement upon the first, is now in the Musée Wiertz.

Wiertz was very bitter over his ill success with the Parisian jury and public, and wrote and spoke most sarcastically of both. To avenge himself he borrowed a picture by Rubens, of undoubted merit, upon which he wrote his name in the presence of a number of friends. The picture was then sent to Paris for exhibition, where, to the great enjoyment of Wiertz, it was rejected as a poor work of art, thus supporting his theory of what Émile Bergerat lately called "the triumphant uselessness" of juries. Dr. Watteau speaks of the scathing contempt which the artist expressed for the imperfect knowledge of ordinary criticism; but he also adds, that he ever professed himself ready to listen gratefully to enlightened opinions, although they might be in direct opposition to his own.

The life of Wiertz, after his return to Belgium, was a strange mingling of struggles and

enmities with success and good fortune. His leading idea, the elevation of art, and his contempt for the painting of genre and all minor subjects, were so deeply seated in his soul, that his utterances concerning what were in fact his general principles often took on the appearance of personality. This made him very unpopular in many quarters; but he had the good fortune to receive timely aid from the Belgian government, which enabled him to live without using his art as a means of money-making, and to preserve his life-work intact, as he so earnestly desired to do.

I shall not recount the many difficulties—such as being forced to paint on canvases partly rolled up—which beset him until he was established in the commodious study furnished to him by the state, in the city of Brussels. There he passed the rest of his life, painting, modelling, dreaming, writing, and planning for still more space, which, as he said, was to enable him to make the present museum but “the preface of his work,” and only the entrance hall to what he saw in imagination. He even went so far as to select the subjects which he intended to paint for the new gallery, and to lay his plans before a high functionary of the government.

To his professional occupation and his writing he added the search for a color-medium, which should give him a means of freer expression, and overcome the difficulties of the mirror-like reflections of ordinary oil-painting. Attached to his studio was a small laboratory, and there, after years of investigation, he discovered his *peinture mate*, which fully repaid him for all his labors. By this medium, which has no gloss, and therefore permits the placing of pictures in any light, he obtained a richer color and a greater freedom of handling. It has repeatedly been stated that the *peinture mate* remained the secret of the inventor, and died with him. This is not true, however, as the process was explained by him in writing, and has been used with success by other artists.¹

Wiertz had a favorite theory that there is a correspondence between all art. The relation between painting and music was a subject of extensive speculation with him, and he believed that some universal law applicable to the expression of beauty (whether to the eye by form and color, or to the ear by sound) existed, which, if discovered, would establish a perfect philosophy of all art.

It has been said that one should die when at his best, and this was the fate of Wiertz. When he was but fifty-nine years old, when his genius was recognized and honored, when his country was proud of him, and when bright anticipations of still greater attainments were before him, his last day came, on the 18th of June, 1865. His death was preceded by visions, sometimes of horror, sometimes of delight. By turns he called for weapons with which to attack the imaginary beings who harassed him, or asked for palette and brushes that he might fix the enchantments before him ere they vanished. With his last breath he exclaimed: “What pictures I shall create! O, I shall vanquish even Raphael himself!”

During the early part of his career Wiertz was severely censured and ridiculed, but, being brave and determined, he so lived out his principles, that finally, if not generally admired, he was at least respected, and even his enemies were forced to accord to him power, originality, and the ability to accomplish an immense amount of work. He also did what few artists have done:—when censured, he seized his pen and answered his critics with the same readiness and ardor with which he painted, sometimes even illustrating his replies with caricatures. As a writer his style was vigorous and clear, and his *Eulogy upon Rubens*, and his essays upon Belgian and Flemish Art,² won him considerable literary fame, and proved him to be an author of no ordinary literary power.

¹ According to a foot-note in the catalogue of the Musée Wiertz, edition of 1866, he left an account of the *peinture mate* in duplicate, and this account was to have been published by the Belgian government; but, so far as I know, the promise has never been carried out. See also:—*Peinture mate*. Procédé nouveau par Antoine Wiertz. À propos de l'Exposition des Cartons Allemands. Bruxelles, 1859.

² *L'Eloge de Rubens, par Antoine Joseph Wiertz*: an essay which gained a prize at the Academy of Antwerp in 1840, and was printed about fifteen years later.—*De la Peinture en Belgique: Quelques Idées sur un nouveau Mode d'Encouragement de la Peinture*. Liège, 1864.—*École Flamande de Peinture. Caractères constitutifs de son Originalité*. (Mémoire couronné par l'Académie Royale de Belgique le 24 Sept. 1863.) Bruxelles, 1864. Illustrated.

As early as 1828 Wiertz had thus written:—"Happy the young artist, the friend of true principles, if he is born in a time when he is encouraged by good taste. But if he is born in an age when mechanism is preferred to expression, when originality and composition are of small importance, then he must go with the current, or he must have the courage to imitate the great Poussin,—to paint for posterity, and, struggling continually against bad taste, remain always poor, but become a great master." When still quite young, he told M. Rogier, Minister of the Interior, that "his aim was the glory of his country"; and it is possible that even then, before he had any reason to believe in such a possibility, he desired to give to Belgium the entire work of his life. His expression, when he received the order for the building of his studio, was entirely characteristic:—"All that I asked has been accorded to me. I am sorry for it; for I do not feel myself at ease when I have nothing to bite [quarrel over]." Grimm says that "the idea of being no longer a martyr made him unhappy."

He bequeathed to Belgium, not only his works, but his papers and his private property of all kinds, on the condition that everything should remain as he left it in the Museum, saying,—“For the execution of this condition, without which none of my works will belong to the state, I rely on the good faith of my country.”

I cannot better conclude this *résumé* of the artist's life than by a translation of a passage from an article in the *Revue Trimestrielle*:—

“Wiertz is, as a painter, a colorist of the Flemish school, but he sacrifices nothing to its traditions; he has for a system, or rather it is in his nature to appropriate all the resources of art, above all, the resources personified in Raphael, Michelangelo, and Rubens; then, master of the secrets of his profession, to give to each subject the manner, the color, and the execution which belong to it, and to march in advance, on the heights of the age, towards the grandeurs of the future, with all the freedom of a proud creator! Science, disinterestedness, pride, daring! no ignorance, no gold, no bridle!—this was his motto.

“A wise anatomist, he never used a model, and had formed an exact science of the harmony of colors, which he intended to give to the world, with the rules of his art, in a grammar for painters. . . . Belgium possesses in Wiertz the most original, astonishing, and courageous artistic organization of the time. This master needs only a little more suppleness of mind and aptitude in suiting himself to his surroundings,—a little less stubbornness in the struggle and less rigidity in his scorn for riches, which is so difficult to follow,—in order to create a modern school worthy of artistic science, and worthy of the philosophic aspirations of our age of light.”

CLARA ERSKINE CLEMENT.

